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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MASERU 000556

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FOR AF/S

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [LT](#)
SUBJECT: LESOTHO: MURMERS OF POSSIBLE EARLY ELECTIONS, DIP CORPS
DIALOGUE

REF: (A) MASERU 544 (B) MASERU 514

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CLASSIFIED BY: June Carter Perry, Ambassador, EXEC , STATE.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

11. (C) In recent days, Embassy Maseru has heard rumors from several independent sources, including a senior Cabinet minister, that the GOL may call early national general elections in Lesotho. While certainly not conclusive, these rumors reflect the governing party's profound leadership uncertainties following a schism that reduced the party's once-comfortable two-thirds majority to a whisker-thin single seat in Parliament. The GOL may feel motivated to undertake bold action that secures a long-term governing role for its party, but early elections could also be a risky move. The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) has varied its desire for a measured approach and is to meet with U.S. and other COMs this week. Diplomatic sources vary on their opinions of the effectiveness of the new ABC political party and its potential threat. End Summary.

Why Early Elections?

12. (C) Embassy sources, including two senior Cabinet Ministers and a top GOL envoy, have recently raised with the Ambassador, other Embassy officers, and at least one other diplomatic head of mission, the possibility that the GOL may call early national elections in Lesotho, possibly in February. On the basis of a five-year mandate for the current Parliament, election planning has heretofore focused on April or May 2007 for the next elections. According to one Embassy source, Prime Minister Mosisili may be considering a request to King Letsie III to dissolve Parliament, which would pave the way for February elections.

13. (C) Local analysts suggest that early elections, a bold gambit on the part of the GOL, would be in response to a recent intra-party revolt that reduced the governing Lesotho Congress

for Democracy's (LCD) two-thirds majority to a single seat (ref B). LCD leaders' vitriolic invective against opposition parties, including the break-away All Basotho Congress (ABC), indicates that they perceive a threat to their continued leadership position, although they have also stated a new party does not stand a chance. Early elections could catch the opposition off-guard, particularly due to the ability of PM Mosisili and his party to tap state assets such as vehicles, public media, and certain financial tools for use in election campaigning. (Note: Of interest, a number of family members of the ABC leader (former Cabinet member Tom Thabane) have approached the U.S. Consul with applications perhaps assessing the calm before the storm. End Note.)

¶4. (C) The South African High Commissioner, who keeps a close eye (and several ears to the ground), believes the ABC movement will not succeed and was an unwise move by Thabane. In his view, the current government still has the winning hand. Donors/partners are more interested in seeing a rational, free, fair and peaceful election that sustains democracy rather than a rushed process. Otherwise, a significant number of international community resources cannot be allocated. U.S. interests dictate that the process -- either now or later -- be carried out in a transparent manner. We are delivering this message to the top leaders, making clear that our major initiatives can only be carried out in a transparent, equitable environment.

¶5. (C) In addition to senior GOL officials hinting at early elections, a local employee of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) recently showed an expatriate living up-country a paper ballot marked for general national elections, dated "December 9, 2006," a date which seems unlikely. However, all these reports are consistent with what a member of Lesotho's Cabinet told the Ambassador (ref A) about the possibility that

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the Prime Minister could move to call the elections "at any time." One member of the IEC acknowledged to a UN official that legally it was possible, but it would be more logical to hold elections no earlier than March to allow preparations rather than have a "caretaker" government (the one in power now) for a period of time.

Comment

¶6. (C) Rumors about early national elections have not yet gained widespread local news media or general public attention. They may simply be an indication of the GOL's uncertainty about how to respond to the dramatic October defection of Thabane and other parliamentarians. Lesotho law requires ninety days between the King's decision to dissolve Parliament and the actual polling; thus "early" elections would probably take place no sooner than February 2007, although the previously discussed May timeframe has not been ruled out by any specific group. Early elections could be a calculated move to benefit the ruling LCD party, and could be destabilizing in the current divisive atmosphere, the view we believe was reflected in the IEC Commissioner's comment. The U.S. and Irish Ambassadors, as well as the UN Resident Representative are meeting with the IEC the week of November 6 since all three donors are involved in pre-electoral support. We hope to ascertain the IEC's actual plan of preparation and to reiterate the essential elements partner nations expect, (1) consultations of all stakeholders,

(2) verification of valid balloting procedures, and (3) international observers.

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